

Where did We Go Wrong? Eight Characteristics of a Multicultural Schools

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Abstract The goal of multicultural education was to ensure that all students have access to inclusive teaching and learning experiences. The design of these experiences should allow students to successfully take part in a rapidly changing world where cross-cultural understanding and intercultural communication skills are essential. This paper discusses the characteristics of a multicultural school, its personnel and the possible impact on children in our schools. It discusses the research-based “Eight characteristics of the multicultural school”; the two-step approach to global cultural education, assessing and maintaining effective multicultural schools. Followed by discussion on if “we want to” and if so, how do we increase use of these characteristics in schools?

Keywords Accountability, Diversity, Cultural Responsive Teaching, Multicultural Schools, Characteristics of Schools

1. Cultural Considerations

Understanding issues related to diversity and cultural competence is critical to functioning peacefully in our diverse society. One solution was developing guidelines for multicultural schools and its curriculum by culturally responsive expert educators. This conceptual framework is based on the assumption that culture is central to student learning. “Teachers are in a position to help end the “culture wars” by activating dual purposes of culturally responsive teaching” ¹. Research merely shows tendencies. Several major factors that appear to contribute to students becoming at risk are teachers’ rejection, unfair competition, mass teaching, low expectations and low academic performance.

The context of teaching has changed as our society has changed, just as the context for literacy practices have changed. Yesterday’s standards for teaching and teacher education will not support the kinds of learning that tomorrow’s teachers must nurture among students who will be asked, in the next millennium, to meet literacy demands that our grandparents could not fathom.²

If one is to believe the experts, everyone will be able to

agree upon curriculum method(s), devise correct educational terminology, and identify which level to start the training process. Recognizing that each person is unique with different learning styles, teachers and students are capable of being ‘matched’ for success. Teachers would be flexible and knowledgeable enough to teach all learning styles in the classroom, especially in the lower elementary grades. Employment of educators who are capable of being more of a “facilitator” rather than a “teacher/lecturer” (which is almost solely a matter of preservice and post educational training) would be another positive step taken. Many people in a position to make a difference in the American educational system harbor the “wrong” attitude toward educational reform, even more negative toward multicultural education.

Can we agree that children emulate the significant role models in their lives and respond to stimuli based upon expectations and learned reactions/ behaviors from those role models? Like the old adage, “children learn what they live”.

For example, if a student is not exposed to an alternate dialect such as orally producing “academic” language or “Standard English” his comfort level, motivation, familiarity and practice in real life settings maybe unsuccessful. Over correction by the teacher causes *affective filter*, the student refuses to identify with the language the teacher desires as a result. No one is born speaking academic language. Exposure to this through literature, reading and writing increases student’s potential for success in schooling. A student’s ethnic identity and language performance is connected to his family, community and personal identity. Teachers have a tendency to assess a child’s competency based on the dialect the child speaks rather than their comprehension of what was read. If there is something wrong with his language or culture – on any level- something is wrong with him and his family, and his community. Respecting the linguistic form (dialect) that students bring into the classroom will help strengthen the student’s skills and improve school and community relationships..

2. Multicultural Implications

Principals, politicians, corporations, community leaders, teachers, parents and the students themselves cannot agree on what is needed and how to go about making the needed changes. It has proven to be less costly to devote more funds to teacher education / staff development (Reading Recovery) or latest trend in packaged programs (Sound Reading Solutions or Hooked on Phonics) than it is to continuously fund the various corrective programs we flood students with later on such as remedial reading and math, Title I, Title VII, alternative education, teen pregnancy, drop-outs, juvenile detention centers, and adult literacy programs. And now added to the mix, educators are mandated to replace the old No Child Left Behind (NCLB) with Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College & Careers (PARCC) and Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Many states are saying, we did not agree to *this*, the federal government is forcing CCSS on us. There are only 12 states still implementing these as of 2015. What is the fear factor of enforcement of higher curriculum standards?

CCSS suggests that educators use more depth with diverse literature and materials across all grade levels. *“Multiculturalism requires not only a change in curriculum, but a change in school climate and pedagogy....Schools and the people in them need to invite diversity, eradicate stereotypes, enhance self-esteem, empathy, and equity which encourages all members of the community to have a voice, and demand educational achievement”*³ [paraphrased].

In good academically diverse schools, the teachers and school administrators have high expectations for all students while emulating positive attitudes toward them. They also respond to parents and members of the community in positive, respectful and caring ways in order for the school community to be part of the community at large. The basics we should find in all educational settings identified by Banks⁴ as characteristics of multicultural schools, utilizes a formalized curriculum that reflects the experiences, languages, cultures, and perspectives of the range of cultural and ethnic groups as well as both genders within the school/ community. Benchmarks to strive for in multicultural schools:

1. The teachers and school administrators have high expectations for all students and positive attitudes toward them. They also respond to them in positive and caring ways.

2. The formalized curriculum reflects the experiences, cultures, and perspectives of a range of cultural and ethnic groups as well as of both genders.

3. The teaching styles used by the teachers match the learning, cultural, and motivational styles of the students.

4. The teachers and administrators show respect for the students' first languages and dialects.

5. The instructional materials used in the school show events, situations, and concepts from the perspectives of a range of cultural, ethnic, and racial groups.

6. The assessment and testing procedures used in the school are culturally sensitive and result in students of color being represented proportionately in classes for the gifted and talented.

7. The school culture and the hidden curriculum reflect cultural and ethnic diversity.

8. The school counselors have high expectations for students from different racial, ethnic, and language groups and help these students to set and realize positive career goals⁴, P.17.

*“Multicultural educators make the assumption that if the eight variables within the school environment are reformed and restructured and the dimensions of multicultural education are implemented, students from diverse ethnic, cultural, language groups and of both genders will attain higher levels of academic achievement and the inter-group attitudes and beliefs of students from all groups will become more democratic”*⁴. This assumption is the thorn that deters motivation and buy-in from everyone involved. When educators do not have the buy-in they continue using inappropriate activities with even more inappropriate literature and content. For example, the kindergarten classes at one local school, who chose to celebrate Thanksgiving with the brown paper bag headband with feathers and pilgrims attire in 2014. Three of these teachers were taught more appropriate ways to celebrate holidays yet they learned this way as a child so that is the way they are continuing, even when it's wrong thinking. Which is recycling stereotypes.

Years later Banks “Checklist for evaluating informational materials and Multicultural education evaluation checklist” has seventeen criteria questions each, with a rating scale of “hardly at all to extensively” both checklists are more appropriate and specific in evaluating what is being seen or done within the school setting rather than the original “generic” eight. For instance in evaluating informational material number eleven asks *“does the material... helps students to understand the extent to which acculturation within U.S. society is a two-way process and the ways in which majority groups have incorporated (and sometimes appropriated) aspects of the cultures of ethnic groups of color and the extent to which ethnic groups of color have adapted and incorporated mainstream culture into their own ways of life?”*^{6, p125}

Maxine Greene⁵ stated “cultural background surely plays a part in shaping identity; but it does not determine identity. It may well create differences that must be honored; it may occasion styles and orientations that must be understood; it may give rise to tastes, values, even prejudices that must be taken into account” ^{6, p.191}. The classroom offers children a world-view of themselves as a people, clan, race or individual by presentations in curriculum materials of their culture. There can be positive or negative thoughts, feelings and ideas left behind by literary works, as well as people. If we want *lessons* to be a life-long learning process we must utilize positive social interactions coupled with small daily academic successes within the classroom; rather than buying into *commercial* packages such as *“Read to Achieve”* or *“Starfall”* promising fast results at a hefty price. The use of multicultural literature can more easily bridge these gaps. It

is important that the literature is authentic, written by authors of the particular culture, about said culture or by those who have taken the time to research, investigate and write about those cultures in a positive, and authentic way.

Culturally Responsive Teachers need to join forces to teach students' using a two-step approach, the first step is *self-awareness and this includes a study of students' ethnic heritage, their current ethnic or cultural group status, and the linkage between their national group and their country of origin*. Self-awareness is how we increase Esteem, which we desire all children to have, that self-confidence and high hopes for themselves providing self-motivation. The second step is *awareness of others, includes a study of the heritages of U.S. ethnic groups, the status of the groups, and then a study of the linkage the groups have with other nations*⁷.^{p30-31} When we are aware of others and recognize that all human beings need the same basic needs as we do then we learn Empathy. When we have positive views of ourselves and those around us we understand, and are able to fight for equity for all.

Multicultural education would be most effective if taught using developmentally and culturally appropriate, *Individualized Multicultural Thematic Units* that covers subjects across the curriculum (such as reading/literature/writing, math, science, social studies, and the arts (music, drama, art etc.). Incorporating the process writing approach would be another strategy/skill for the child to share his culture or individual experiences. All activities are child centered, research-based and literature-based with community support and participation. In a country lauded to have been built by immigrants and currently maintained by their offspring, U.S. educational systems can no longer overlook any one group's contributions in academia, no matter personal biases.

Multiculturalism is not restricted to people of color it is a universal issue that needs implementation in educational institutions, on all levels. Equality does not have to mean monolingual or bilingualism in every building, but it does require a multicultural awakening in curriculum development, which provides Equity. Education reform does not have to be a painful experience, just as providing/ ensuring an equal opportunity in education should mean equitable for all children not just those of middle- or higher-socioeconomic status. We have gone into overload, there is an evaluation criterion for teachers (PARCC) and students (COMPASS), we have benchmarks (grade level and assessing multicultural schools) and curriculum standards (Common Core State Standards/ Grade Level Expectations) all designed to enhance our school systems preservation and implementation. So why are our schools still lacking in the basic tenets of culturally responsive teaching? It may seem like a major undertaking and most would rather just do enough to get by or hopefully get students to pass the state required tests each spring.

If we take a closer look at these benchmarks designed to maintain an effective multicultural school, we will discover that with a little planning on the front end, the results provide

teachers the opportunity to be more effective in the classroom.

Banks⁴ shared eight Benchmarks educators should use to maintain an effective multicultural school:

1. A multicultural education policy statement sanctions and supports diversity.
2. The staff has positive attitudes and expectations toward diverse students.
3. The school staff reflects ethnic and cultural diversity.
4. The curriculum is transformational and action-focused.
5. Parent participation provides a cultural context for teaching and a link with student personal/cultural knowledge.
6. Teaching strategies are constructivist, personalized, empowering, and participatory.
7. Teaching materials present diverse racial ethnic and cultural perspectives on events, concepts and issues.
8. Each program component is monitored on a continuing basis^{p106}.

When was the last time, the school's policy statements were updated? More importantly, was benchmark implementation of "sanction and support diversity" ever included in the schools mission statements? Many education systems created their mission statements with limited follow up or revision reported (for example New York updated in 1989, Indianapolis in 1996, and my institution is in process, 2014). The second benchmark "Staff reflect positive attitudes and expectations toward diverse students" is difficult to verify or evaluate. How do we and who is responsible for measuring "positive attitudes and expectations" fairly and effectively? The third benchmark "staff reflects ethnic and cultural diversity" is an even grander goal; the majority of educators' are still Euro-American. This is historical and does not seem to be changing anytime soon. More ethnic and culturally diverse peoples are acquiring education degrees, yet these increases in the (teacher /administrator) workforce are small in comparison to those of European American. The average newly hired teacher (regardless of race) only stays in the profession three years. Other than mismatches between education level and salary, what is the underlying factor that causes so many to leave so quickly? More often than not, ethnic and cultural school workers are hired for the cafeteria, grounds, janitor or bus driver than as a class room teacher or office worker/ administration. Fourth benchmark "curriculum is transformational and action-focused" is progressing, since CCSS demands that more in depth, hands-on exploration of content across the curriculum (not just in science or math). The goal is to get and keep students engaged in the learning process from start to finish. The only issue with "action-focused" is the interpretation of what is action-focused varies by district and even more so by educators that this is not consistent. Fifth benchmark "parent participation to provide cultural context for teaching and a link with student personal/cultural knowledge"; is a hit or miss engagement on most campuses. Due to the fact most

parental contact with schools is usually centered on disciplinary issues or IEP (individual education plans) not curriculum enhancement. Bringing in parents and community members to share their cultural knowledge would open doors for better understanding of the children and their families in the classroom/ school community at large. Many times educators assume that parents are not capable of understanding the curriculum goals due to lack of education or visibility or perhaps thinking that parents just don't care. All of which are false, most parents do care and trust the school personnel to do what is best for their children at all times. It is possible parents do not feel welcomed or just the fact that they trust their child's school to do their best for their children. The sixth benchmark "teaching strategies are constructivist, personalized, empowering, and participatory"; the teachers' role is to prompt and facilitate learning. Too many times teachers only teach how they learn or how they were taught – passively; this idea of sharing the power in the classroom with students is feared by some "teachers" as they look at this method as giving up control of classroom will lead to chaos. How do we get educator's to this stage without going back to school for retraining? The simplest and most meaningful way could be improvement of professional development time, with diverse topics, strategies and relevance to current needs, issues in education. The seventh benchmark "diverse teaching materials" provide culturally authentic perspectives, events, and issues. We have to acknowledge that textbooks do not provide a fair, just, equitable or diverse perspectives and supplementing these text are needed. Literature is one of the easiest ways to incorporate diversity across the curriculum, if one has the understanding and skill to select appropriate materials for the classroom. Not all materials marketed for children is appropriately representing the cultures and ethnic groups they claim, regardless of popularity. For example, *Indian in the cupboard* (series)⁷ by Lynn Reid Banks were popular but not authentic in its portrayal of Native American's...the main character was stated to be Iroquois but dressed in buckskin worn by Plains Indians, which is a cultural mismatch. These inaccuracies were never corrected in any of her follow-up books nor the movie that was made. The last benchmark, "monitoring programs" is where the challenge really lies; who is responsible for monitoring schools and when? Researchers' suggest evaluation every three years that seems too long to me. Whereas, I would suggest that evaluation and monitoring of programs for multicultural inclusion be ongoing with annual or biannual reviews would aid intervention as quickly as possible.

3. Further Considerations Needed

First, if schools are being evaluated on a regular basis (biannually, annually) for their multicultural characteristics and authentic implementation as culturally responsive we would see a shift in society as a whole. All educators need to be trained or retrained in how to identify bias in curriculum,

then teach K-12 students how to identify bias. Most college degree programs have at least one diversity course requirement for graduation, but do the students "get it"? Do they live it and use this information once the final grades are posted? They will be encountering a multitude of cultural groups in the real world and it is very difficult to pick and choose who one encounters in our daily walks of life.

Schools should make sure multicultural perspectives are incorporated into all aspects of school life by:

- Promoting diversity as a positive learning experience;
- Incorporating multicultural perspectives across all learning domains;
- Incorporating multicultural, anti-racism, and human rights perspectives in school policies and practices found in "Anti-Bias Curriculum";
- Enhancing teachers' and students' intercultural understanding and cross-cultural communication skills;
- Making sure all school policies, including three year strategic and annual plans, codes of conduct, dress codes and discipline policies reflect the diverse nature of the school community fairly.

Did we (administration, employees, educators, students, parents, community, and state) ever reach a consensus on any of these multicultural school characteristics or benchmarks? We acknowledge that students do not start life with an equal chance to succeed. Family socio-economics, health, access to resources and experiences in their home, community or school are not equitable or available to all students at all grade levels across our country⁸. There needs to be a school-wide and community-wide buy-in on curriculum methods, teaching of and using correct terminology, training process, recognizing that everyone has unique learning styles, need for facilitators who are teacher leaders rather than lecturer teaching and actively recruiting diverse educators to teach K-16+ students. These concepts are just a small ripple in a very large, ever growing pond.

Frederick Douglas said it best " The American people have this to learn: where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is in organized conspiracy, to oppress, rob and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe."⁹ One last thought to ponder, so who is willing to take responsibility to ensure that all students, regardless of race, abilities, creed, color, sexual orientation, age, gender or religion have equitable opportunities in education and society as a whole?

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